

Usually when we get to the PEACE candle of Advent, the first thought that comes into my mind is Peace? Really? Like the prophets used to say, how can we proclaim peace, when there is no Peace! My favorite Christmas cards often say “Peace on Earth.” Do we ever get any closer to that vision??? Do our Christmas greetings and promises really make a difference? Is there a chance for Peace???

Let’s look at the Advent readings leading up to Christmas. We always hear from the Hebrew prophets, and the message can be challenging indeed. This morning we heard from Isaiah Chapter 40, sometimes called Second Isaiah (either Isaiah later in time, or a close follower of Isaiah). What was happening in the Israelite nation? 2nd Isaiah, from chapter 40 on, is speaking to Israelites who were taken into exile to Babylonia. The Babylonians had plundered Jerusalem, destroyed the magnificent Temple in about 595 B.C., deported leaders of Israel, and now at about 540 B.C. (45 years or 2 generations later) there are hints of being able to return home. While “First Isaiah” explained their suffering as punishment for sin, like idolatry (making and following other gods), this “Second Isaiah” is assuring the people that punishment time is over, that they actually received “double” penalty for their sins. And that their God was now ready to comfort, forgive, restore, etc. The metaphor of God as a parent comes through loud and clear, yes??? The metaphor of God as a “Refiner’s Fire,” as cleansing and punishing, was often used by the prophets to explain Israel’s suffering.

On the psychological and inner spiritual level, one might agree that while we may avoid harsh or corporal punishment, often we “learn the hard way” or need to be corrected with a stern word and even punishment or consequence for our actions. One favorite Christian hymn is “Spirit of the Living God, melt me, mold me...which alludes to a refiner’s fire, through we trust that we we can be molded with more gentle instruction!”

Our New Testament reading had John the Baptist, a fiery prophet, quoting Isaiah, saying “Prepare Ye the Way!” Well, John we know could be very fiery like the prophets of old, and is quoting Isaiah. And John’s

“baptism of repentance” is no easy thing. All were going to him confessing sins... essentially asking to be melted and molded in a new way, asking to experience cleansing and forgiveness. So to all our talk and hopes for Peace, the prophets and John the Baptist say: Wait just a minute, the road to peace starts with a refining fire, with confession of sin, with mountains and valleys being leveled out... a level “highway” for God. Isaiah may very well have been imagining a highway from Babylon back home, back to Israel.

But the spiritual deeper meaning and perhaps a contemporary meaning can be....How can we get a more “level playing field” between peoples? How can we restore peace among tribes, among nations? There is much talk these days about our congresspeople acting in a tribal manner... more allegiance to party than to the common good. (So the Bible story is relevant to modern day)... The Babylonians in 540BC were about the fall to Persia, and it was King Cyrus of Persia who essentially set the Israelites free, allowed them to worship as they wished, to return to their homeland. Cyrus of Persia, the new ruler, became known as wise and kind, with respect for other tribes and religions, with humane treatment of all his subjects. We need such leaders around the world these days!

So 2nd Isaiah has a message of comfort and hope, of return to Israel ... he starts his speech with Comfort, Comfort my people, and ends it with “he will feed his flock... and gather the lambs in his arms!” The Bible can be interpreted as a continuum of different “levels” of spiritual truth, truth at the surface earthly level, and truth at a deeper spiritual level. At the earthly level, Isaiah knew Cyrus was a great new leader, freeing the people, an earthly King Par Excellence. Yet Isaiah was also speaking about an “Eternal King,” One who can give the deepest restoration, forgiveness as needed, and restoration. Isaiah’s poetic speech implies that God is both the Fiery Refiner with consequences for sin, AND also the Good Shepherd, who remembers sin no more, feeds (his) flock, and “gently leads the mother sheep.”

Similarly, our New Testament story of John the Baptist, while clear about the need for cleansing and confession, does emphasize that repentance is wed to the FORGIVENESS of sin. Theologians often say that God's judgment is swallowed up by God's mercy. The truth may hurt at first, but ultimately sets free! John was clear that his message and his baptismal ceremonies in the river Jordan were about repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people flocked to him in droves. Then, as now, we know that we, all of us, are flawed human beings that need to confess, apologize, re-set ourselves and turn over a new leaf from time to time!

But Jesus goes even deeper. While John was a kind of intermediary, as many priests have been with confessionals, he talks about how Jesus baptizes not with water, but with "the Holy Spirit." Now, yes, the Holy Spirit has been likened to both fire and gentle breezes, but the newness of this proclamation by John is that Jesus will tell and share about the gift of Spirit that goes deep into our hearts and minds, that does not require water or ceremony (Jesus is recorded to have performed few or no baptisms, so John says that while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit!)

Just as Jesus will bring a new refinement, a new cleansing, a new transformation... from deep inside, via his Holy Spirit, so Peace on earth cannot be legislated or brought about by any ceremony... can there be peace on earth? Between nations? between states? between city councilors? Between tribes? Between our red and blue tribes? between religions? between genders? Between humans and natural environment? Not easily... all efforts start from the individual heart and mind, as the song goes: "Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me!"

No, it is not easy, but let's trust in John the Baptists words: There is one coming, more powerful than I ... whose sandals I am not worthy to untie, who can make peace more skillfully than I, who can love more steadfastly than I... who, like the visions of old, will come like a Good Shepherd, will gently lead the mother sheep, and give a Holy Spirit that will guide us, teach us, yes also challenge us with Truth that can set free. He

would show himself to not only suffer as a servant, unjustly, sacrificially, as did John Baptist, but suffer WITH us in ultimate compassion, as the man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief. Jesus was Prince of Peace and King of Compassion! Compassion is indeed one road to peace, since compassion gives up the need to point fingers, to demonize. Instead we can feel or at least understand the sorrows and hardships of a person and forgive rather than demonize that person.

Is there a chance for Peace? Our best chance for “more peace” in the world is following the Prince of Peace, of compassion, understanding, grace and truth, following the way of Christ. Yes, this is our best chance for peace... following the way of the Good Shepherd, who feeds us with his teachings and example, who gathers us in Christlike arms with healing love.

Is there a chance for Peace? Our best chance for “more peace” in the world is beginning with our own heart. It is receiving Grace for our own limits, receiving Forgiveness for our own transgressions. It is resting in the healing love of Christ who “speaks tenderly” as Isaiah urged, and listens with understanding. It is resting in Christlike arms of peace. Jesus said “Come to me all ye who labor and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest.”

Imagine how Jesus’ spirit might come to you; Rest in his spirit for the next few minutes as I play a piano medley that you will recognize.... *AWAY IN A MANGER..... SILENT NIGHT.*